



Jackie Chan

With *Shanghai Noon* re-released on DVD and *Rush Hour 2* heading to cinemas, Jackie Chan is at the top of his kung-fu game. But how did he get there?

WORDS: STEPHEN APPLEBAUM

Watching Jackie Chan in action in the savvy cross-cultural Western, *Shanghai Noon*, it is difficult to believe that the Hong Kong-born superstar is now 47 years old. Even when you meet him in the flesh, his grace, agility and

irrepressible energy make him appear far younger.

He has not reached middle age unscathed, however. A fan of silent movie stars Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, the death-defying stunts he performs in his films have left him with aches and pains from the countless bones he has broken, and his skull even has a hole in it. He describes himself as “happy-go-lucky”, but behind the smile and the easy going charm is a man who feels the need to keep testing himself.

“I don’t like to live a normal day every day,” he says. “I like to challenge myself. I like proving I can do it.”

More than that, he has to prove that he can do it properly. His perfectionism, and his determination, is legendary – he once spent two days trying to perfect a single shot; after 1600 takes (yes, 1600) he finally gave up.

“It used to be that if somebody said, ‘No, Jackie, don’t do that,’ then I’d say ‘I have to – I have to prove I can do it.’ I’d waste time. I’d waste money. I’d waste my energy. But the shot at the end was always the same.”

The more takes he does, the more Chan puts his own life on the line for our entertainment. Because if there is one thing you can be sure about when you watch him hanging from a helicopter, or sliding down the glass roof of a towering office block, it’s that it really is Chan and not a stunt double.

Inevitably, Chan has almost lost his life before. Most notably when he sustained that hole in his head, while shooting *Armour of God*, jet-lagged, on location in Yugoslavia.

“I was in a castle in the mountains and I had to jump to another castle, using a tree that stood between them,” he recalls. “When I jumped the tree broke. I know how to fall, so

my arms saved me. But this little bit of rock went – boom! – into my head, and blood poured from my ears. I spent seven days in Zagreb hospital, then I flew to Paris and stayed in an American hospital for another ten days. Then, from Paris, I drove back to Yugoslavia for another seven days shooting. They could only shoot me from my left side because they’d had to shave my head. But we had to finish the movie. I almost died. I’m a lucky boy.”

It is tempting to relate Chan’s compulsion to drive himself to the limit back to his childhood, and his years from the age of six spent as an apprentice at the Peking Opera. There he studied singing, dance, gymnastics, mime, acting, acrobatics and a broad range of martial arts systems, and would no doubt have been pushed hard by his stern and demanding teacher, Yuen Chan-Yuan.

At the school, Chan lived, slept, ate and trained with his fellow pupils; they were practically his family. Years later, little has changed. When Chan stays at hotels on location, he surrounds himself with his personal team of stunt people, hiring out suites so that they can be together like a family.

That is not a stunt double

From the outside it looks as though Jackie Chan has never really grown up. Indeed, his almost childlike enthusiasm for what he is doing on screen is one of the things that makes watching him so enjoyable. So does the man himself think that he has grown up?

“Everybody calls me a big boy,” he admits. “I think I’ve been around the same people for too long. Also, a lot of people have to think how to make money to feed a family, to pay the rent, or to buy a house or a car. I don’t have to. So I have no problems and nothing bothers me.”

That isn’t quite true. East Asian cinema’s biggest star has had plenty to worry about over the years from fans.

“In the old days,” he says, “I had to keep my private life secret because girls would try to commit suicide. One girl stood in front of my office drinking poison. Some girl



“I had to keep my private life secret because girls would try to commit suicide”